

STATEMENT OF LINDA M. SPRINGER
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before the

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS EFFORTS

MAY 11, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting OPM to testify before this committee today about the steps we are taking to prepare the Federal Government, as an employer, for the possibility of a pandemic influenza. This responsibility is consistent with our mission to ensure the Federal Government has an effective civilian workforce. As the President's principal advisor on human resources management policies in the Federal Government, OPM has a Governmentwide role to play in preparing for a possible pandemic influenza.

The President's *Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza (Implementation Plan)* tasks OPM with developing appropriate guidance on human resources (HR) management policies relating to a possible pandemic influenza. In addition, the President's *Implementation Plan* directs OPM to update three existing telework guides. But even before the *Implementation Plan* was released by the White House last week, OPM Director Linda Springer established an internal working group to identify issues facing Federal HR professionals and other officials responsible for

ensuring that the business of Government continues even in the face of potential disruptions to the Federal workforce caused by a pandemic influenza. The working group also is charged with addressing the concerns of Federal employees regarding the possibility that they, or members of their family, might be affected by a pandemic influenza.

We have approached these tasks with a set of guiding principles in mind. First, we should “cause no harm” and avoid contributing to an atmosphere of panic in the Federal workforce, while at the same time maintaining a sense of urgency. Communication will be key to carrying out our role. Our communications with Federal agencies and employees on HR issues relating to a possible pandemic influenza will be credible, clear, timely, frequent, visible, and sensitive. In coordination with the White House, we will consult with other key departments and agencies, as well as the Chief Human Capital Officers Council and Federal Executive Boards, to identify the issues to be addressed in our guidance materials and the audiences to which these materials should be directed. Our policies will strike an appropriate balance between the institutional interests of the Federal Government as an employer and the needs and concerns of individual Federal employees and their families. Finally, we will draw on OPM’s considerable experience in providing advice and assistance to Federal agencies and employees in emergency situations.

OPM will reach out to any information source or other resource that can help us carry out the tasks assigned by the President’s *Implementation Plan*.

The internal Pandemic Working Group we established at OPM has already been at work identifying the categories of HR issues for which guidance already exists, needs

revision, or should be developed. We've been aided in this process by keeping an inventory of questions we've already received from Federal HR professionals and individual employees. Here is a sampling of the questions we've received so far:

What kinds of alternative work arrangements are available to assist agencies and employees in accomplishing a critical agency mission during a pandemic influenza?

Local health officials have confirmed that since the children in my son's day care center have been exposed to the flu virus, their families have also been exposed to the virus. My child is not yet sick. What leave may I take to care for my child?

My elderly mother died due to complications from the flu. I have to make arrangements for and attend her funeral. May I use sick leave?

If I have been designated as an emergency employee, may I refuse to report for work if I don't think it is safe to do so?

While we have not yet finalized answers to the questions we've received so far or completed our consultation with other Federal departments and agencies, it is clear that our guidance materials must include information on alternative work arrangements and other HR policies—including telework policies—that can assist Federal agencies in continuing to perform their critical missions in the event of a pandemic influenza. We are keenly aware of this Committee's interest in ensuring that Federal agencies take appropriate steps to integrate telework policies into their continuity of operations plans. Let me assure you that we will include a discussion on teleworking options and policies in our guidance to Federal agencies.

Our guidance also will describe relevant leave and work scheduling policies, as well as other benefits and flexibilities designed to assist Federal employees and their

families in the event of a pandemic influenza. In addition, our guidance will include information on hiring flexibilities available to deal with the possibility that large numbers of Federal employees might be unable to carry out their duties and responsibilities for an extended period of time—at least on a local or regional basis, if not on a national or worldwide basis. We may identify additional categories of guidance that should be provided as our review continues.

OPM is on track to meet the 3-month deadline specified in the President's *Implementation Plan*. In addition, we anticipate that some information will be provided in the interim.

It is important to note that OPM also must prepare to carry out its own responsibilities in the event of a pandemic influenza. To this end, we have been updating OPM's critical responsibilities and tasks and making decisions about how those tasks will be accomplished in the adverse circumstances presented by a different kind of emergency situation. We will be practicing our plan for continuing to carry out the work Congress and the President have entrusted to us. We expect that what we learn from these efforts will help inform the guidance we provide other Federal agencies and employees. We will also encourage other Federal Departments and agencies to practice their continuity of operations plans in the context of a possible pandemic influenza.

The Federal Government must ensure that it can respond to the needs of our employees so that we will be able to respond to the needs of the Nation. OPM will fulfill its responsibility to prepare the Federal Government to do just that.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to responding to any questions you may have.

